



Rescue, Rehoming and Sanctuaries Survey 2026

Key Findings

The UK equine welfare sector: A safety net at breaking point

Rescue centres, sanctuaries and rehoming organisations are the safety net for the UK's equine sector – but that safety net is under significant and growing strain. As the cost-of-living crisis continues to affect horse owners, welfare cases are growing in number and complexity, with the burden falling on rescue organisations whose own costs continue to escalate.

At the same time, the support structures holding the equine welfare sector together are weakening, with donations and rehoming applications falling as intake numbers rise. This year's findings follow trends that have intensified over the last three surveys since 2023, and the result is a bottleneck: all respondent organisations are now at or near capacity, with a combined total of over 4,500 equines in their care.

Many have already had to take difficult measures to remain viable, including redundancies and intake restrictions. Two centres are facing planned or guaranteed closure. Organisations are clear that they will not compromise on the welfare of the animals in their care, but their ability to absorb further pressure is rapidly diminishing.

Since this survey closed in April 2026, the UK has experienced a record-breaking period of high temperatures and widespread drought. The full impacts of recent patterns of extreme weather are yet to be felt, but increased pressure on hay and grazing supplies are likely to add to the list of compounding challenges facing the sector.

This year's survey paints a bleak picture of a welfare sector which is struggling to sustain current levels of provision. If current trends continue, the ability of rescue organisations to continue providing vital support to equines in need is far from guaranteed.

Key finding 1: Demand for welfare support is outstripping capacity

Demand for equine welfare support has risen across the UK, and with increasing numbers of animals coming through their doors, rescue organisations are close to their limit.

Welfare requests are increasing...

↑ 81%

report an increase in requests to hand over an equine

↑ 67%

report an increase in welfare concern calls

↓ 1/3rd

report a decrease in rehoming applications

81% report an increase in requests to hand over equines, 67% have seen a rise in welfare cases, and 68% report an increase in welfare calls. Meanwhile, over a third have seen more equines returned by adopters, further adding to the flood of incoming animals.

“We are not able to help as many other horses at present, nor do we see the situation improving.”

...But rescue centres are at capacity

✗ 50%

are at or over capacity

⚠ 50%

are close to capacity

For organisations to be able to offer sustainable support to every equine that needs their help, rescued animals must flow out of, as well as into, their centres. Despite the vast majority aiming to rehome equines in their care, around a third have seen a decline in rehoming applications, meaning that horses are remaining in rescue centres for longer.

With around 4,500 horses already in the collective care of respondent organisations, this has created a bottleneck. Half of respondent organisations are now at or above capacity, and the other half are almost full, leaving limited room remaining to respond to rising demand.

“There is significant pressure across all species with more animals requiring assistance than there is capacity for.”

Key finding 2: Organisations are under growing financial pressure

As the cost-of-living crisis continues, maintaining financial stability continues to be a serious challenge for equine welfare organisations, with many struggling to balance spiralling outgoings with decreasing sources of funding.

Costs are on the rise...



90%

are concerned about
the increased cost of
living

↑ 84%

report an increase in
equine management
costs

↑ 89%

report an increase in
facility/ site
maintenance costs

Over 90% of respondents are concerned about the impact of the increased cost of living on their operations, and all are facing cost increases across the board. On top of increases in vet, farrier, transport and insurance costs, 84% have seen a rise in management costs (including forage, feed and bedding), 89% have seen maintenance costs go up (including electricity, gas and water) and 74% report rising staffing costs.

“The overall longevity of operations is currently at risk due to the financial crisis.”

...But organisations are losing funding

↓ 63%

have received fewer large
donations this year

↓ 65%

are finding it more difficult to
secure major donors

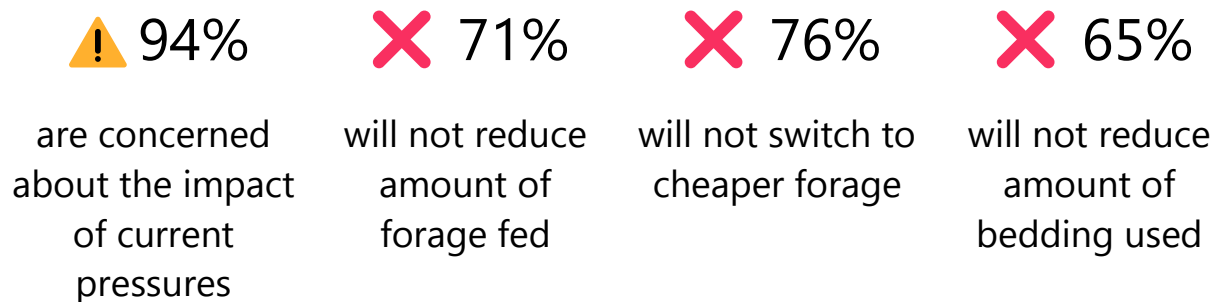
Meanwhile, dwindling sources of funding are leading many to worry about their ability to meet these rising costs. Few receive any government funding, and many rely on reserves, grants, legacies, donations and fundraising to stay afloat. However, over the past year, 63% have received fewer large donations, and 65% are finding it more difficult to secure major donors. As welfare demands and costs continue to escalate, this is income that organisations cannot afford to lose.

“Financial security in these worrying times is a whole different game!”

Key finding 3: Organisations have limited response options

Welfare organisations are actively taking steps to mitigate rising pressures and increase financial and operational efficiency. However, with respondents clear that they will not take measures which compromise welfare, their options are increasingly limited.

Organisations won't compromise on welfare...

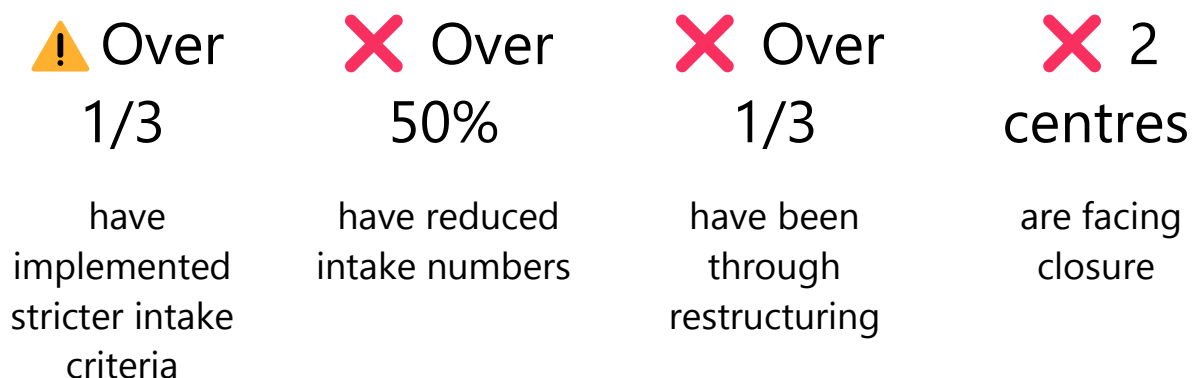


With 94% of organisations concerned about the impact of current pressures, most are already implementing cost saving measures, including reduced opening hours, grazing rotation systems and alternative bedding such as deep litter and rubber matting. Changes to management practices made for welfare reasons have also yielded cost benefits, including increased turnout time, use of track systems, and barefoot trimming.

However, respondents are not prepared to take any steps which reduce health or welfare standards: 71% will not reduce the amount of forage fed, 76% will not be switching to cheaper forage, and 65% will not reduce the amount of bedding used.

“We always review our working practices and will make savings were possible that do not compromise welfare and horses’ needs.”

...But they are running out of options



The impact that organisations are seeing from smaller cost-saving measures is limited, and many are being forced to make tougher decisions to stay afloat. Over a third have implemented stricter intake criteria, and over half have reduced their intake numbers - a difficult move at a time when the number of animals needing support is on the rise.

With intake numbers reduced and centres at capacity, options for equines in need are now severely limited. For some organisations, the worst-case scenario has already become a reality: Two centres are facing planned or guaranteed closure.

“We do not have the funds to remain open another full year. Closure is guaranteed.”

Broader welfare implications

With organisations anticipating further cost rises over the coming year, the situation facing the welfare sector looks more likely to get worse than better. Currently, less than half are confident in their ability to maintain operations over the next 12 months.

It is difficult to forecast exactly how the situation facing welfare organisations will develop over the coming year. However, if financial and operational pressures remain as they are, the sector is likely to experience several knock-on effects:

Cost-saving measures will further reduce capacity

Ongoing reductions in expenditure, including redundancies and restructuring, are likely to further limit the ability of organisations to respond to rising welfare demand. Increased reliance on volunteers is an option being explored by some centres, but many are already reporting difficulties in recruitment on the ground.

Less support for owners will lead to more welfare cases

Nearly half of respondents who currently provide financial support to horse owners have had to reduce this over the past two years. A continuation of this trend will increase the risk of these horses subsequently becoming welfare cases. However, with rescue centres overflowing, struggling owners may soon be left with nowhere left to turn.

More equines will remain in unsatisfactory welfare conditions

With rescue centres already at their limit, there is little capacity left to support the rising numbers of equines requiring welfare intervention. Anecdotal evidence suggests that centres are already making tough decisions about which horses can be taken in, with many only uplifting cases

involving direct cruelty. There is an increasing risk of equines being left to suffer in situ where the threshold for cruelty is not met.

The impacts of extreme weather are likely to affect forage supplies

Second only to the cost of living, the impact of ongoing extreme weather in the UK is now one of the biggest issues facing the sector, with 97% of respondents expressing concern about extreme weather and 92% worried about ongoing forage availability. Since this survey closed, many areas of the UK have experienced a period of extended drought, with further impacts on forage availability and cost likely in the near future.

What next?

A follow-up to this survey will be shared with Rescue and Rehoming centres across the UK, exploring what support organisations feel they need most. This will ensure that any future recommendations for tackling these challenges are informed by the sector itself.

NEWC will also use the results of this survey to engage with horse owners and raise awareness of the broader issues feeding into the pressures currently being experienced by the welfare sector, including breeding practices and forward planning to ensure forage availability.

Finally, NEWC also intends to share the results of this survey – including responses to follow up questions - with governments and political representatives in the UK, highlighting the ongoing challenges facing the sector and recommending actions to address them.

About this survey

This survey was undertaken by World Horse Welfare and Redwings Horse Sanctuary on behalf of the National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) from 30 March 2026 to 27 April 2026.

The purpose of this survey was to better understand, and raise awareness of, the current pressures facing the UK's equine welfare sector. Previous surveys were conducted in 2023 and 2024.

38 complete responses were received from equine welfare organisations from across all regions of England, Scotland and Wales. The majority of responses came from managers from rescue organisations which operate at least one site in England.

All respondents had horses in their care, with a total of approximately 4500 equids within the care of all respondent centres combined at the time of the survey.